

Gay & Lesbian



My sexuality is my personal life and has nothing to do with my work



Fight for your right Filguys' Marrz Balaora wants to raise awareness about lesbian domestic workers

Girl-on-girl power

Arthur Tam meets a group of lesbian domestic helpers who are fighting for their rights to self-expression (and employment)

Do you see all these women here in the park today? I would say about 60 percent of them are lesbian."

Emma, an Indonesian agency worker, spends her Sundays in Victoria Park along with many other foreign domestic helpers. "They were not [openly] lesbian before they came to Hong Kong, but now they are here, they are free to express themselves. You know how Indonesia is Muslim, so women can't be lesbian or else they will be jailed."

For the lesbian domestic worker, Hong Kong provides not only more job prospects but is also a safe haven for self-expression compared to their home countries. But coupled with challenging work conditions and their struggle for civil rights in the city, life is far from easy for these women. In fact, some even endure verbal and physical abuse. Marrz Balaora, a lesbian domestic worker from the Philippines, remembers an incident in 2006 where a passer-by provoked her group of friends.

"[He said] that all we needed was

a man and we wouldn't be lesbians anymore," Balaora recalls. Later, when one of Balaora's friends left the group to return home, she was attacked by the same man, who 'beat her and tore off her clothes', says Balaora. The police, she claims, eventually arrested the pair and, shortly afterward, Balaora's friend was dismissed from her job as a domestic helper and deported back to her home in the Philippines. "After this incident, we knew we had to do something," she says.

Balaora and her lesbian sisters have since banded together to form a group known as the Filguys in support of the Filipino lesbian domestic worker community. The organisation started with 21 people but after five years it has grown to 295 registered members – not only in Hong Kong, but also in Australia, Canada and the USA. The main focus of the group is to educate members 'to help them

articulate what they want and how to deal with discrimination in the workplace and in society', says Balaora, who herself has come out to her employers. "I am very lucky because my employers have a lesbian family member, so they are very understanding. My sexuality is my personal life and has nothing to do with my work, but during my work I need to be myself and feel relaxed or else it would be very difficult."

Filipino and Indonesian housekeepers are true multi-taskers – they cook, clean, organise, shop, take care of their elderly employers and serve as the primary

daytime caregiver to their employer's children. "When employers know that we are lesbian, they fear that we will influence their children with ideas of homosexuality," says

Balaora. Some employers with these concerns require their housekeepers to refrain from any masculine attire and appearance, and to dress in a standard maid's uniform, she says. Sacrificing self-expression is a price that many lesbian domestic workers are forced to endure in order to stay employed.

Balaora also sheds light on the advantages of hiring a lesbian domestic helper from the employer's point of view. "For female employers, they are sometimes more comfortable with a lesbian

housekeeper because they know that we will not try to flirt with their husbands," admits Balaora. "Also we are generally stronger. As a child, I hated ironing and washing dishes. I preferred carrying rice bags and doing men's work – it's why I have a more masculine, butch frame."

Every Sunday, the Filguys enjoy their day off together on the streets of Central, near Windsor House. The group also hosts talks to promote awareness in the community. They have invited academics like Dr Amy Sim from the University of Hong Kong to give talks on sexuality and empowerment. The director of the Immigration of Migrant Workers group was also invited to give updates about the ongoing battle of permanent residency for Filipino workers in Hong Kong.

Filguys is working hard to create a safe place for their members to socialise and to bring awareness to issues concerning the LGBT community in Hong Kong and the Philippines. But Balaora hopes that her group can do even more with support from other community teams. "Fighting as a lesbian group can be very limiting. It's why we need to join together with other organisations for the advancement of the migrant worker."

To find out more about **Filguys**, head to www.facebook.com/filguyshk.

